Against the Grain

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Core Competencies of Electronic Resources Librarians Adopted as NASIG Policy

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flow or conversation about a particular topic. Compare this to a monograph on the Roman Empire in the first century BCE or a study of the evolving reception of Boccaccio in the English-speaking world. I spend a great deal of my professional time studying how much it costs to creat an article or a book, and the cost of book-creation is far, far higher than most people suppose, even if the publisher is not paying an author a large advance. When all costs, including the appropriate allocation of overhead, are taken into account, a book requires an investment of around $50,000. Some people have put that number lower (you will hear figures as low as $15,000); most put it around $25,000. For my purposes here, it doesn't matter which end in the range you determine is closest to the truth, as even $15,000 — or $5,000, for that matter — is a very big number when the economic model is Gold OA.

And here we see a very important limit for Gold OA: it is very hard to implement for works that are longer than an article. This is because the author has to pay for everything, whereas in the traditional model, the costs are shared by all the customers. Some journals charge as much as $3,500 to make an article OA; *PLoS ONE* charges $1,350. Those figures are a fraction of what it costs to make a book, even if the book is published only in a digital edition. (As a rule of thumb, the cost of print comes to about 20% of a publisher's net receipts. Many suppose that this figure is much higher.) For Gold OA to fully embrace long-form scholarship, it is going to have to come up with some extraordinary innovations to lower costs.

We should spend a minute on the cost structure for journals to see what limits it imposes on Gold OA. In a recent excellent article,[6] **Andrew Odlyzko** noted that the average article published under the traditional system garnered revenue of about $5,000. He reached this figure by dividing the number of new articles published each year into the total revenues of the journals industry. (Interestingly, **Elsevier** came in just slightly above the average.) There is a lot that is squishy about that figure (using new articles leaves out the revenues and costs of managing backfiles; the average varies widely by discipline; what constitutes an article?; etc.), but it's useful as a guideline. With *PLoS ONE* charging a mere $1,350 per article, there is a big gap to close: $3,650. Where will that money come from?

We know it can't come from the authors, many of whom struggle to find the money even to pay a fee the size of *PLoS ONE's*. Eliminating print won't close the gap, and even if it were eliminated, the gap is too large. Some people would argue that much of that $5,000 is profit (hiss), but even *PLoS ONE* operates at a surplus. The fact is that the gap cannot be closed without tossing out other things that we associate with journal publishing.

PLoS ONE managed to lower its costs (and to operate at a profit) by changing the nature of editorial review. This is a provocative point, but for *PLoS ONE* and many other Gold OA services (see the Website for the new PeerJ, for example) a key decision was to review material not based on its importance or originality (the hallmark of a traditional journal) but merely on its methodological rigor. This has the practical effect of increasing the acceptance rate from the neighborhood of 30% to somewhere around 70%, which in turn more than doubles the revenue without significantly increasing the costs. Many Gold OA services also drop copy-editing as a way to lower costs even further. This is a limit of a different kind, presenting a challenge to the author who is not a native-English speaker.

Thus one of the limits of Gold OA is that it cannot sustainably practice the form of peer review and other editorial oversight associated with traditional journals. Is that a good or a bad thing? It depends. If you subscribe to the view that the authoritative model of traditional publishing is a good thing (as do most tenure and promotion committees), then it is a bad thing. If you think that this model should be challenged, it is a good thing. For my part, I think it is a different thing and that comparing Gold OA publications to traditional journals is adding apples and oranges. Why can't we have both?

Although the benefits of OA publishing are broadcast regularly (speed to publication, free access to disadvantaged people, the establishment of community-based forms of review, the availability of texts for large-scale data-mining, etc.), the limits are less frequently identified. But Gold OA has them, and they include not being able to provide services for all disciplines, difficulties in working with longer texts, disadvantaging scholars whose primary language is not English, a need to attack the cost structure and the editorial regime that is associated with it, and, most importantly, the requirement of a human factor to resist submissions by inferior authors and the need to assert a brand to reflect the presence of that human factor. I don't see that any of these limits are a reason not to support Gold OA publishing, but they do argue for continuing to support traditional publishing at the same time.

What we need to minimize these limitations, or at least to understand them better, is to study them and to talk about them. There is a place for an online review or multiple reviews of OA services, for which **Beall's** work is only the beginning. **PLoS** should be put under the same scrutiny that we now see for **Elsevier**. This is not to denigrate Gold OA publishing but to improve it. The practices of OA publishing should be treated in the same way as the articles in OA publications — that is, openly.

Endnotes

1. **Peter Suber's** general introduction to OA remains the best place to get an overview of the varieties of OA, including the all-important distinction between Gold and Green OA: *http://legacy.earlham.edu/~peters/fos/overview.htm*.
2. I wrote about this way back in 2004 in *First Monday*: *http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/1163/1083*.
3. For **Beall's** explanation of "predatory publishing," see his blog: *http://academia.edu/1151857/Bealls_List_of_Predatory_Open-Access_Publishers*.
4. **PloS** has a good overview of the issues surrounding article-level metrics: *http://www.plosone.org/static/almInfo*.
5. **Tim McCormick** has been hard at work on the Public Library of the Humanities project: *http://tjm.org/2012/12/20/public-library-of-humanities-envisioning-a-new-open-access-platform/*. I drafted a proposal on the Scholarly Kitchen: *http://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2010/03/15/lets-make-open-access-work//*.
6. This article can be found at arXiv: *http://arxiv.org/abs/1302.1105*.

Core Competencies of Electronic Resources Librarians Adopted as NASIG Policy

The **NASIG** Board approved and adopted **"Core Competencies of Electronic Resources Librarians"** as **NASIG** policy at their June 2013 meeting in Buffalo, New York.

Sarah Sutton, former chair of the **Core Competencies Task Force (CCTF)**, notes that she and the **CCTF** have high hopes that both library and information professionals and LIS educators will find the document a valuable resource upon which to base their work. **Sarah** writes, "I am so gratified that many practitioners have already used the draft document, which circulated in the professional community over the past few months. It has sparked much interest and use, as evidenced by the wonderful sessions at the recent **NASIG Annual Conference**. I think the document supports **NASIG's** Vision to promote dialogue and professional growth, to provide learning opportunities, to advocate for its constituents, to challenge assumptions and traditions, and to take a leadership role in the information environment."

"Core Competencies of Electronic Resources Librarians" is available in the Continuing Education section of the **NASIG** Website, *http://www.nasig.org*.

Sanjeet Mann and **Sarah Sutton** for the **Core Competencies Task Force**.